

Explication: The poem "Yom Kippur 1984" by Adrienne Rich

"Yom Kippur 1984," by Adrienne Rich, is written in free verse with varying line lengths. Stanza lengths also vary and there is no apparent pattern to the varying stanza or line lengths. Rich does not use meter or rhyme, except in a few specific places where she applies iambic meter. Infrequently she uses alliteration where she wants a more dramatic effect.

The poem is about feelings of loneliness, alienation, prejudice, and hate. The narrator seeks to find answers to such questions as, "Where do you (especially minorities) find solitude in a society full of hate, fear, and crime?" and, "What does solitude mean to so many of us who are already alone, many miles away from any friends or family?" The overall feeling is of the narrator struggling with ideas and talking to herself as she tries to grasp and understand the nature of her own inquiries. So, as a reader, it feels as if she talks to herself as much as she does to you. Because of this, there is a spontaneous quality that seems like what the narrator says, she just then thought of and told it to you.

Because of the disquieting feeling of the subject matter, free verse seems to be a natural and appropriate form to use for this poem. A formal structure, which contains some kind of uniformity and harmony with consistent meter or rhyme, would go counter to the author's purposes here. Since the subject is about fear, hate, and disunity, Rich's use of the free verse form with a lack of any kind of order in the line lengths, visually gives a feeling of disorganization, discord, disunity, and conflict.

There are several other interesting visual effects in the poem. For instance, line 7 talks about a structure "suspended from the cliffs." The line itself appears to be precariously situated on top of the much shorter one beneath it, with the word "cliffs" suspended in the air. Then, line 16 consists of a solitary word, "once." It seems appropriate that this word stands alone because the word itself has a singular meaning, and because the narrator is alone. So, this solitary word, which is among many that are above it and below it, accentuates the aloneness the narrator must feel. It's possible, too, that this word stands by itself simply as the result of margin restrictions of the page. However, whether Rich meant it this way or not, it's effective nonetheless.

Rich's opening line is visually distinctive, as well as verbally. It is a question: "What is a Jew in solitude?" Verbally, this is one of the few lines with meter. It is perfectly iambic. Perhaps it suggests that harmony can only be found if you're interested enough to search for it; and, the process begins by asking the important questions. So, to this purpose, the narrator's question is itself in harmony, unlike most of the poem. Line 4 of this stanza is also a question, similar to the opening line. It, too, is written in iambic meter.

The visual distinction of the first line in the first stanza is that it's a short line, half as long as the rest of the stanza. Visually, this adds to the nature of the question, which is about solitude. In other words, the line itself stands alone and apart from the rest of the stanza, echoing the aloneness contained within the question.

In line 5, the phrases "*empty street*" and "*empty beach*" (italics mine) uncomfortably follow the idea of fear, implied in the previous lines. Since, "empty" would intrinsically mean that no one is there, why would "empty" be associated with fear? Because "empty" is an illusion and can never be trusted, especially by women, gay men and women, and Jews. To them, there's no place that could be *empty* of something to fear. "Beach" and "desert" are also in association with fear, which are, ironically, images of peacefulness and beauty.

One of the most graphic and effective parts in the poem is the fourth stanza. In this stanza, the narrator addresses Robinson Jeffers about his hatred of the "multitude" (people). She says that "multitudes" are

fields of lupines and "torched poppies," and the rolling surf. These appealing images roll and lure the reader (and hopefully Jeffers) smack into the point of her argument. The next images portrayed are not as pleasant; in fact, they are quite the opposite. Her method is to show contrast in resemblance; and that contrast is harsh.

Contrasted with the images of beauty and color are oppressive, dismal images of multitudes, yet separate individuals, bent over sewing machines breathing "denim dust;" and of a single bed that "is never empty" because many bodies must sleep there, sleeping in shifts—assembly-line fashion. The picture that emerges is that these people have become part of the assembly line they are slaves to. Ironically, the bed seems tired and is crowded not only with bodies, but with their dreams, too. The feeling, then, is that their dreams go no further than that overburdened, sweaty bed. These are the people that individuals like Jeffers sees through hatred as "multitudes" and as "blurs."

At the end of this stanza, the narrator mentions "barbed-wire and searchlights, the survivalist's final solution." The "survivalist's final solution" has triple meanings. One is, of course, a direct reference to Hitler's death camps. The second, is a reference to Jeffers' hatred of people and his self-imposed isolation that keeps them away from him. The suggestion is that his hatred puts him behind a sort of barbed wire and lights, although he calls it solitude. Third, is the implication that if the violent world in which we live continues to become more and more violent, eventually our fear will increase to a point where we begin seeking protection behind barbed wire, isolating ourselves like Jeffers. The relationship between the three meanings is that in each case the reactions are the same.

The implication of the Nazi death camp reference may not be obvious. Within this one reference are three levels of meaning. The first is the most obvious: the isolation caused by the imprisonment of the Jews (and others). A second level is the isolation created when country after country turned their backs and refused to let the fleeing Jews in or to help them. It must be an unimaginable horror to realize there's no where in the world you can go, and you are left only to the Nazi's final solution.

The third level is even more obscure, but perhaps ultimately the most tragic because many prisoners turned their backs on each other. In or out of the camps, the multitude of Jews were cut off from the world. However, in the camps, living at or below the survival level created enormous distrust of their fellow prisoners—their own people. The prisoners withdrew from one another, and became, then, absolutely solitary in their miserable existence. At this point, they were effectively cut off from all humanity. At such a terrifying time, these people needed more than ever to band together for whatever meager comfort and companionship they could offer each other. But, overwhelming fear caused them to isolate themselves totally from humanity. Fear begets fear. The narrator's concern, I believe, is the world will become ever more violent, causing us to withdraw into this bleak pit of fear like the prisoners in the death camps.

Considering the many levels inherent in this single phrase, as well as the images and messages contained within this single stanza, I believe it is the most powerful section of the poem. In addition to the powerful images and messages, this stanza also contains some of Rich's most effective alliteration. For example, "denim dust," the "d's" explode at you like dust. And the sound of "shattering skies" shatters on the tongue when said. Line 29 has a string of "p's" and then "s's" which seem to push one word into the next, emphasizing the never ending, dismal work performed by these wretched multitudes who are just a "blur."

The sixth stanza is more unique in form than the others because it is visually compact with short, uniform lines. Plus, it is rhythmical with an iambic meter. It's the only stanza with this unified visual appearance and consistent meter, thus, underscoring her message that people should come together. She suggests that people should seek to be attached to communities, which she calls "the center," because there is safety there. Outside of the communities we become individual, separate, isolated—being on "the edges." There is danger at the edges.

At the end, the narrator comes full circle back to her original questions. The last stanza begins exactly the way the first stanza begins. This helps tie the poem together. At the end, however, the poem is as troubled as it begins. There is no resolution, but it continues to ask questions.

Personal evaluation: Initially, I was drawn to the poem because of the title. The words "Yom Kippur" really jumped out at me because I've never seen a Jewish poem before (other than my own). Ironically, the reason I was drawn to read this poem, I discovered, is part of the subject matter Rich explores in the poem: Feeling separated from the multitude, or "your own people" (as she calls it). Jews are only 2% of the US population, so it's a common feeling to feel alone and cut off from "your people." There's a feeling of home even if there's just one other Jew with you in a crowd of non-Jews.

It was a pleasure for me to read this poem, too, because of the intensive focus on Christianity, that I (or any non-Christian) am subjected to, particularly in literature. As an English major, I've been forced to learn far more about Christianity than some Christians know about their own religion. As a literature major, I know I can't avoid this, that it's part of history. But it was a breath of fresh air for me to work on this poem because, although it speaks to anyone, there's a special understanding if you're Jewish. I've read far better poetry than this poem is, but in this case, I wasn't reading it for quality, rather because it felt like coming home.